

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PANAMA

S E C R E T BUENOS AIRES 6434

USCINCSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MARR, AR

SUBJ: TRANSFER OF USSOUTHCOM

REF: STATE 164406

1. THE CT BELIEVES THAT THE EXISTENCE OF SOUTHCOM AND ITS ATTENDANT FACILITIES IN THEIR PRESENT GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION HAS SERVED A USEFUL PURPOSE. I DETAILED THESE AT SOME LENGTH IN A LETTER TO PRESIDENT NIXON (COPIES TO THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE MELVIN LAIRD, THE ASST. SECY. FOR LATIN AMERICAN AFFAIRS CHARLES MEYER, AND DR. KISSINGER) ON MARCH 19, 1971, AT A TIME WHEN THE DISESTABLISHMENT OF THE SOUTHERN COMMAND WAS UNDER CONSIDERATION FOR REASONS OF ECONOMY. AT THAT TIME, I POINTED OUT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SOUTHER COMMAND IN THE CANAL ZONE AS A SYMBOL OF US CONCERN FOR AND INTEREST IN LATIN AMERICA. IT HAS ALSO BEEN EXTREMELY USEFUL IN PROMOTING CLOSE PERSONAL CONTACTS BETWEEN SENIOR US MILITARY PERSONNEL AND THEIR COUNTERPARTS AND IN PROVIDING A FAMILIAR LATIN AMERICAN ENVIRONMENT FOR THE TRAINING OF

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LATIN AMERICAN MILITARY IN ITS SEVERAL SCHOOLS. LASTLY,

THE SOUTHERN COMMAND IN ITS CANAL ZONE LOCATION, HAS GREATLY FACILITATED THE SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION OF THE US MILITARY MISSIONS AND THE SECURITY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN THE AREA, ENDOWING THEM WITH THE CAPACITY TO RESPOND FLEXIBLY AND RAPIDLY TO AN INTEGRATED APPROACH. FOR YEARS, THE PRESENCE OF THIS COMMAND IN PANAMA WAS GENERALLY WEL-COMED BY THE ARGENTINE MILITARY AND THERE WAS NO EVIDENT ADVERSE IMPACT AT LEAST IN THIS DISTANT LAND. ALTHOUGH THE PRESENT PROPOSAL ENVISAGES ONLY THE TRANSFER OF THE SOUTHERN COMMAND, I BELIEVE THESE POINTS IN LARGE PART TO BE STILL VALID.

2. IN MORE RECENT YEARS, NEW WINDS HAVE COMMENCED TO BLOW. PANAMA'S LONGSTANDING AGITATION OF THE CANAL ZONE ISSUE HAS FOUND AN EVER WIDER AUDIENCE HERE AMONG ELEMENTS HOSTILE TO OR CRITICAL OF THE US. EAST WEST DETENTE HAS CONTRIBUTED TO A GROWING RESTLESSNESS OVER ALLEGED RIGIDITIES IN US HEMISPHEREIC POLICIES AND DEFENSE PLANS. LOCALLY THE REPLACEMENT OF A MILITARY GOVT BY AN ELECTED GOVT WHICH SEEKS TO IDENTIFY ITSELF WITH THE THIRD WORLD AND TO REGAIN LATIN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP WHILE REDUCING US INFLUENCE IN THE AREA HAS LED TO A CHANGE IN OFFICIAL ATTITUDE WITH THE NEW GOA,

PUBLICLY ANNOUNCING ITS SUPPORT OF PANAMA'S CLAIMS TO THE CANAL. THE ARGENTINE MILITARY, NOW IN RELATIVE ECLIPSE, IS HEWING CLOSELY TO THE OFFICIAL LINE AND CANNOT BE EXPECTED TO STAND UP TO PERON ON THIS KIND OF A MATTER. THE ARGENTINE PUBLIC IN GENERAL PROBABLY IS INDIFFERENT; PANAMA IS A LONG WAY AWAY AND THE ISSUE STILL IS NOT MUCH IN THE PUBLIC EYE.

3. WITH RESPECT TO A POSSIBLE MOVE OF THE SOUTHERN COMMAND TO THE UNITED STATES, DOUBTLESS MANY OF ITS MORE TANGIBLE FUNCTIONS COULD CONTINUE TO BE PERFORMED FROM A CONTINENTAL US LOCATION, HOWEVER, PUBLIC OPINION IN ARGENTINA IS NOT LIKELY TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE US PRESENCE IN PANAMA WITH OR WITHOUT THAT COMMAND OR TO HAVE ANY REAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE COMPLICATED TREATY ISSUES INVOLVED. AND CERTAINLY THOSE WHO AGITATE SUCH ISSUES LOCALLY WILL MAKE NO SUCH FINE DISTINCTION. THE USG WILL BE SUBJECTED ON THE CANAL ISSUE TO THE SAME KIND OF CRITICISM LOCALLY, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER

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THE SOUTHERN COMMAND IS MOVE, AND IS UNLIKELY TO WIN ANY CREDIT OR GOODWILL HERE SIMPLY BY MOVING THE SOUTHERN COMMAND. THEREFORE, A DECISION ON THIS MATTER SHOULD, IN THE COUNTRY TEAM'S OPINION, BE BASED PRIMARILY UPON WHETHER THE CONTINUED PRESENCE OF THE SOUTHERN COMMAND IN THE CANAL ZONE IS REQUIRED BY THE SECURITY OR OTHER NATIONAL INTERESTS OF THE US, AS DETERMINED BY THOSE CHARGED WITH THAT RESPONSIBILITY. IT IS RECOGNIZED, OF COURSE, THAT THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE COMMAND

MAY BE PROPOSED AS ONLY ONE ELEMENT IN A LARGER NEGOTIATING PACKAGE IN THE UPCOMING TALKS, IN WHICH CASE THE QUID PRO QUO MIGHT BE MORE EVIDENT.

4. NEITHER THE ARGENTINE GOVT NOR THE MILITARY ARE LIKELY TO VIEW FAVORABLY A MOVE OF THE SOUTHER COMMAND TO PUERTO RICO, WHICH IN CULTURE AND CHARACTER IS CONSIDERED NEITHER LATIN AMERICAN NOR NORTH AMERICAN (US). ONLY RECENTLY, THE ARGENTINE NAVY HAS STATED THAT IT WOULD NOT SUPPORT, FOR ESSENTIALLY THIS REASON, HEADQUARTERS IN PUERTO RICO FOR THE PROPOSED INTER-AMERICAN NAVAL COORDINATING AUTHORITY.

5. REGARDING A CONTINUING US MILITARY PRESENCE IN GENERAL IN THE CANAL ZONE, THE GOA DOUBTLESS EXPECTS THAT THE USG IN ITS OWN INTEREST WILL MAINTAIN A POSITION THAT ENSURES AND ADEQUATELY SAFEGUARDS THE ADMINISTRATION, OPERATION AND PROTECTION OF THE CANAL, LEAVING ARGENTINA FREE TO PURSUE WHAT IT REGARDS AS ITS OWN INTEREST IN SUPPORTING THIRD WORLD POSITIONS WHICH SERVE TO REDUCE US INFLUENCE IN LATIN AMERICA. IT IS WORTH NOTING TOO THAT ARGENTINA WOULD BE AMONG THE LEAST AFFECTED LATIN AMERICAN STATES IF THE CANAL FOR ANY REASON WERE CLOSED TO TRAFFIC. ITS OWN ACCESS ROUTE TO THE PACIFIC OCEAN IS RELATIVELY SHORT. THEREFORE, THERE ARE FEW COMMERCIAL OR OTHER LOCAL GROUPS WITH AN INTEREST IN PRESSING THE GOA TO OPPOSE ITS SUPPORT OF PANAMIAN ASPIRATIONS.

6. TO REINFORCE THE EXCELLENT COUNTRY TEAM ASSESSMENT WHICH IS PRESENTED ABOVE, I DESIRE TO ADD MY PERSONAL ASSESSMENT DERIVED FROM MY MANY YEARS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND INVOLVEMENT IN US NATIONAL SECURITY MATTERS AND FOREIGN POLICY AFFAIRS, INCLUDING OVER FOUR YEARS OF DIRECT ASSOCIATION WITH USCINCSO AND THE US SOUTHERN COMMAND. IT IS MY FIRM CONVICTION THAT, UNDERLYING

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THIS WHOLE SITUATION IS THE RELENTLESS PROBABILITY THAT ANY RELOCATION OF US SOUTHERN COMMAND AT THIS TIME WOULD BE REGARDED AS AND WOULD BE ONLY THE FIRST STEP IN AN OVERALL ATTEMPT TO FORCE THE DISMANTLEMENT AND WITHDRAWAL OF THE US MILITARY PRESENCE FROM THE CANAL ZONE. THE ADVANTAGES OF RELOCATION OF SOUTHERN COMMAND, WHICH ARE BY NO MEANS CLEAR, ARE HEAVILY OUTWEIGHED BY THE DISADVANTAGES WHICH ARE CLEAR ENOUGH. RELOCATION OF SOUTHERN COMMAND THIS TIME WOULD BE AN UNMISTAKABLE DEMONSTRATION OF A RETREAT POSITION WHICH COULD ONLY PROVIDE COMFORT TO OUR ENEMIES AND RESULT IN DISMAY FOR OUR FRIENDS. THE WITHDRAWAL OF US SOUTHERN COMMAND WOULD BE WIDELY VIEWED AS ANOTHER DEMONSTRATION TO THE WORLD IN GENERAL AND TO THE PEOPLE OF LATIN AMERICA IN PARTICULAR THAT WHILE OUR ENEMIES ARE ON

THE MARCH, THE UNITED STATES--THE LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD--IS
IN RETREAT. WITHDRAWAL OF US SOUTHER COMMAND FROM THE CANAL
ZONE WOULD BE CONSIDERED AS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS IN THE ADVERSARY
POSITION EXISTING IN THAT AREA. MOREOVER, IT WOULD BE AN IRREVER-
SIBLE PROCESS WHICH WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE OUR FUTURE NATIONAL
SECURITY OPTIONS. FOR THESE REASONS I CONSIDER RELOCATION
OF US SOUTHCOM AT THIS TIME TO BE DAMAGING TO US NATIONAL
SECURITY AND TO OUR FOREIGN POLICY INTERESTS. AS I SAID
IN MY LETTER TO PRESIDENT NIXON DATED MARCH 19, 1971:
"IT IS BAD GEOPOLITICS."
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